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Reagan's Latin Crusade

Frustrated Administration Seeking to Lay Unrest at the Door of Russians and Cubans

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WASHINGTON, July 27 — President Reagan's repeated references in his news conference Tuesday to the Soviet Union and Cuba as key sources of unrest in Central America reflected growing frustration in the White House that the public, Congress and the press have failed to appreciate the serious threat posed by Communist interference in the region.

It was no accident, Administration officials said today, that Mr. Reagan returned several times at the news conference to the theme of Soviet and Cuban subversion.

At one point, he ascribed the trouble in Central America to "revolution exported from the Soviet Union and from Cuba and from others of their allies." Later he said, "If you go to the source" of violence in the region, "I think you're talking about the Soviet Union."

Along with a desire to ease concern that the United States was increasing its military involvement in Central America in a way that could lead to war, Mr. Reagan and his advisers wanted to use the news conference to bring the debate over Central America back to the role of the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua as the main instigators of unrest.

But many legislators continued to express confusion and dissent over the President's stated policy.

The House Speaker, Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., was sharply critical of Mr. Reagan's defense of his policy at the news conference, calling the President's performance inept and ill-informed. "There was a general feeling on the floor of the House last night that the President didn't do a good job," Mr. O'Neill told reporters.

Today, Secretary of State George P. Shultz and William P. Clark, the President's national security adviser, briefed senators on the policy. Afterward, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, said that

while Mr. Shultz "did a masterful job" at the briefing, he did not dispel the "very deep suspicion" harbored by many senators on the Latin American issue.

House Opens Debate

The House, meanwhile, opened debate on a proposal to cut off covert assistance to rebels who are seeking to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government. Congressional leaders predicted a close vote on the measure, and the White House press secretary, Larry M. Speakes, agreed that the outcome of the voting, likely to take place Thursday, was unpredictable. [Page A9.]

Administration supporters and critics agree that the future of Mr. Reagan's policy depends largely on his ability to swing public opinion behind his assessment that the Communist threat is serious and that a United States security shield in Central America is essential to the long-term growth of democratic institutions and economic development.

Administration officials acknowledge that there has not been universal acceptance of the severity of the Communist threat and, perhaps more importantly, that even among those who accept the danger, there has been widespread disagreement about how to respond to it.

Criticism Called Unfair

Some critics, for example, argue that Mr. Reagan has emphasized military and covert intelligence action at the expense of diplomacy and economic assistance, a criticism that the Administration says is unfair. "For every one dollar we provide for security assistance to that region we provide three dollars for economic and human development," Mr. Reagan said at the news conference.

He also said that the United States was "not seeking a larger presence" in Central America and added, "We have no military plans for intervention."

"There's been entirely too much attention to the efforts that we're making

to provide that security shield, and not nearly enough to the other elements of our policy," Mr. Reagan said.

Some of Mr. Reagan's aides, however, differing with his assertion that planned military exercises in Central America are routine, have said that the maneuvers are designed to lay the groundwork for an increased American military presence and include preparations for a possible partial blockade of Nicaragua.

Plans Are Reported Unchanged

Those plans, they said today, remain unchanged. There is no evidence, Administration officials said, that Mr. Reagan, concerned about public reaction to the exercises, was reassessing the decision he made two weeks ago to increase American military activity in Central America.

Classified Defense Department documents, officials said, specifically call for refining and testing plans for the quarantine of Nicaragua, the storage of American military equipment in Honduras, the installation of radar and electronic eavesdropping systems, the construction of a United States military base on the Atlantic coast of Honduras and support for increased covert operations in Nicaragua.

Concern about the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua, specifically the aid that the Administration says they provide to guerrillas in El Salvador, has been the driving force behind Mr. Reagan's Central America policy from the earliest days of his Administration.

That concern, heightened by recent signs of growing Cuban military involvement in Nicaragua, was the main reason Mr. Reagan decided earlier this month to step up American military activities in Central America, according to his aides.

The Issue of Evidence

The debate over the extent of Soviet and Cuban interference in Central America invariably comes down to the issue of evidence. The Administration has repeatedly accused the Soviet Union and Cuba of fomenting revolution in Central America by arming Nicaragua beyond any reasonable defense requirements and supplying weapons and advice to guerrillas in El Salvador.

Mr. Reagan, for example, reported at the news conference that a Soviet freighter, the Ulyanov, was approaching Nicaragua with a cargo of Soviet military equipment, including transport helicopters. Other officials have said that six other Soviet freighters have docked in Nicaragua in recent months with shipments of Soviet-bloc arms.

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